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THE ATTITUDE OF THE MODERN THEOLOGIAN TOWARD JESUS CHRIST

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January is the time when people take account of stock in business. Why should we not do it in our thought? In the midst of all the storm and stress of theological reorganization and international enmities, what do men think about Jesus? From one point of view the question seems almost ludicrous. Can it be possible that men are seriously thinking about Jesus when they are engaged in mutual slaughter? But is there not all the more need for Christians to think about him, just because the world has forgotten him?

The word "modern," in the designation of our subject, is not to be taken in a merely temporal sense but as referring rather to the point of view. By a modern theologian is not meant necessarily a contemporary of our days, but one who, instead of following the presuppositions and methods that characterized the theology of earlier times, sympathizes with the religious needs and aspirations of progressive men of our own times, concerns himself with the religious questions that trouble them particularly, and in attempting a solution of them consciously adopts the methods of scientific and philosophic investigation now in vogue among scholars in other fields of study.

As respects his attitude toward Jesus Christ the modern religious thinker is distinguished from his predecessors, in a general way, by *the method of his approach* to his subject. Early Protestant, mediaeval Catholic, and ancient Catholic thinkers held that a declaration of the true and final view of what Christians should think of Christ had been definitely given by constituted external

authority. The modern theologian does not so believe, but sets aside such supposed authority in favor of the principle of free investigation. The ideas of other times as well as those of our own times he judges according to their worth to men who are engaged in the efforts to live the highest life. He seeks to be truly scientific in his thought and at the same time religious in his spirit without destroying thereby the unity of his inner life. To him, that alone can be scientifically true which corresponds with scientific fact, and that alone can be religiously true which enhances the value of life. With respect to Christ, then, there are two substantial questions: First, What do we actually know about him? Secondly, In the light of these facts what does he signify to us? The first is a matter of historical investigation and depends for its answer on our acquaintance with the fact-materials and our ability to construe them. The second is a matter of the moral and religious judgment, and proposes, in addition, on the personal character and worth of the student himself.

This being understood, we may say that there are three points of view from which the place of Jesus Christ in modern religious thought may be found, namely, the investigation of historical fact, the analysis of character, and the estimate that springs from religious faith.

I. The Point of View of Historical Investigation

The modern student necessarily begins his attempt to reach a theological view of Jesus Christ by an effort to ascertain the original facts out of which the interest in him arose. It makes no difference to him where these facts are found, whether in the writings of the New Testament, in the works of Jewish and Gentile writers of those times, or in anything that throws light on those times, and he is willing to take the consequences of whatever discoveries may be made. He has good reasons.

In the first place, Christians have always held that their religion sprang out of historical facts and that it cannot be understood apart from them. We have never believed that a Christian religious system sprang fully formed into existence at a definite point of time or that it came immediately from the mind of some great thinker. It came in the course of the lives of men, and the most conservative have allowed the passage of about a hundred years for its distinct appearance.

In the next place, the modern student has a stern conscience for facts. They are sacred to him and claim his first attention. Earlier generations of thinkers had a conscience for ideas rather than for facts. Facts, to them, were only the temporary garments of reality;

ideas alone were abiding, they *were* reality. Theologians of those times were interested in the facts of Jesus' career mainly as material for the proof of the truth of ideas or doctrines and their warping of facts is sometimes rather startling. The modern student, being trained in scientific induction rather than platonic speculation, looks upon ideas and doctrines as abstractions and interpretations and therefore as exhibiting always the weakness of human intellect. Ideas must be tested by facts. Hence he goes to work on the available historical material touching Jesus with the firm determination to get at the facts no matter at what cost to inherited or cherished beliefs.

In the third place, the instruments for historical investigation are more nearly perfect than they have ever been and the materials at hand are more abundant. With the progress of any science there is a corresponding progress in the perfection of its tools. As telescopes and microscopes and cameras have greatly extended our power to discover the realities of the physical world, and as the methods of psychology and epistemology have greatly improved the knowledge and interpretation of the movements of the human spirit, so the methods of historical criticism which are indispensable to the writing of history in any field have been carried out with such thoroughness that the student of Jesus' career can go to work with far more assurance of discovering what actually happened than was possible when critical methods were little known. Allowing for the inevitable mistakes of men in both method and judgment, it can be modestly claimed that the world

in which Jesus moved and the part he took in it are clearer to the minds of students now than they have ever been since men began the description of them.

If, now, we may undertake to summarize the outcome of the historical inquiry about Jesus, it is about as follows:

1. Jesus truly lived in the place and about the time generally believed. He is no mere legendary hero, no myth, no hypostatized idea, but a living, breathing, feeling, thinking, active man. His experiences are not alien to us but touch ours at every point. Thanks to the keen scrutiny of the biblical documents, the analysis and sifting of them, the comparison of them with one another and with other ancient literature, this has been established against opposite contentions that threatened at one time to prevail. The occasional note of discord on this matter among scholars serves to heighten the harmony. It is to be remembered that it is one thing to hold this belief on tradition and without examination of the evidence and quite another thing to know it after the full light of day has shone on the question.

2. Jesus was such a man as is described in our New Testament narratives. Here we are not competent to speak of absolute accuracy in matters of detail. Anyone who has had experience in working out a knowledge of fact from documentary or oral materials knows how difficult it is to reach certainty in matters of detail even about small affairs. It is much more difficult to do so in reference to events that have stirred the popular imagination. It is not easy to draw the line strictly between

the known and the uncertain in regard to great men of half a century ago, such as Abraham Lincoln, or great men of the present, such as David Lloyd-George. Nevertheless their figures start up before us with their own striking characteristics, and even if public sentiment has gathered about them and obscured some of the precise lineaments of their countenance, this is not only a proof of their greatness but an evidence of their real character. So also of Jesus Christ. His figure looms up in its unique grandeur through a vista of nineteen hundred years. What if there be a degree of haze in our atmosphere as we gaze back wonderingly through the long centuries! What if we cannot tell precisely how far his words and deeds as they lie before us in the Gospels bear the marks of the interpretative love and faith of his followers! That is not altogether a loss, for it helps us to know more fully what he was. And so we can say today that the common man who reads his New Testament with an open mind can know for himself who it was that gave this book its soul.

3. Jesus Christ is the source of the Christian faith. Whatever may have come directly from Paul or John or some other, it is he who has written himself all over the books of the New Testament, because he wrote himself down first of all in the hearts of the men who composed these writings. His spirit lives there. Through it he has stamped his image ineffaceably on the minds of multitudes who have borne his name since those early days. If there is a distinctive Christian religion, if there is a distinctive Christian trust in God, if there is a distinctive Christian type of life,

it is because Jesus Christ lived on this earth.

Such are the fundamental facts respecting Jesus which historical investigation yields to the modern thinker who seeks to understand his significance from our human life. But the mere accumulation of historical facts would have as little value as the gathering of scrap-iron until it is melted and remolded for a further end. The facts are to be estimated and interpreted.

II. The Analysis of the Character of Jesus Christ

Here the modern student does not concern himself with theological or philosophical presuppositions, good or bad. They would be likely to compromise his judgment and determine his decision in advance. We modern men must try to see him with our own eyes and estimate his character as freely and fairly as we would the character of any other man. It may serve to protect us from the danger of arbitrariness if we remember that men have been prone to see in him the things they prize the most in themselves and others, so that their views of his character have been manifold and contrary. Many ancients saw in him the terrible Judge coming on the clouds; that is, they read the character of Jesus in terms of the expected Messiah. Greek Christians saw in him a mysterious being whose real nature was hidden behind a veil of flesh and to be known only by the initiated; that is, they reduced his character to the terms of a philosophy of religion. Augustine saw in him the supreme example of divine grace; that is, he read Jesus' character in his own religious

experience. Others saw in him the meek sufferer, the ideal of the recluse who leaves the wicked world, and who became the great penitent for human sin; that is, they saw him through the eyes of their own ascetic morality. Others with the sense of guilt upon them saw in him the vicarious sufferer for sins; others the infallible teacher, the truly rational man; others the intimate friend and companion; others, again, a sweet mystic.

To claim that the modern student's view is never warped by presuppositions or partialities or that our descriptions of his character do not manifest the weaknesses of our own age, would be to claim altogether too much. Every age has its limitations. At the same time the modern man has the advantage of knowing what earlier ages have thought and why they did so, and that is no small matter. Besides, he has a method of approach that is distinctive and consciously adopted.

Negatively stated, the proof-text method and the proof-text idea, as well, are set aside. There are few things more likely to pervert one's understanding of Jesus' moral outlook than the idea that the Christian at the beginning of his Christian life accepts certain doctrines of the person of Christ and that these are to be established by the evidence of texts. To treat Jesus' words and deeds as evidence of something we call his "nature," whether that be single or double, is to lose the clue to an understanding of the purpose of his life as he apprehended it for himself. Similarly, in order to know his character it is necessary to reject the assumption that he was in possession of information touch-

ing the moral significance of his own life or the lives of others obtained by him in ways inaccessible to us, for this would interpose an effective barrier to our moral fellowship with him and conceal his real character from view. Character, and the moral interpretation of life that comes with it, is always an achievement, not an external bestowment—not a given quantum at the beginning of a career, but a conscious purpose acquired through the struggle that words and deeds express. Knowledge obtained or possessed without moral effort would be an incumbrance to the moral life.

Still less are we to be precluded from a free analysis of Jesus' moral character by the gratuitous assumption that only one side of his person is open to our intelligence or that there were mysterious experiences of his or a mysterious knowledge in which we can have no part. The modern attitude toward him is a more reverent one. For such a view would put him far away and make his character an insoluble enigma. It is impossible to trust a person whose inmost character is an enigma. For in such a one something is held back, he does not trust himself to us. To view Jesus in this way is to close the door to a true knowledge of him and leave us to guess the riddle of life without his aid. No, we declare that there is nothing back of character in God or man that we care about. If Jesus is entitled to our deepest allegiance it is not because of something hidden behind his human life but because of the quality of that life itself.

Some time ago there arose a cry, "Back to Christ!" At the time it probably meant, "Back from the churches and their creeds, back from

the speculations that have hidden him from view, back even from the apostles, back to the teachings of Jesus himself! We have had the mind of the theologians and the disciples; let us have the mind of the Master!" It was a wholesome invitation and it has been accepted in a fuller sense than was meant at first. Not only the Lord's teachings, but his feeling and thinking and doing, the motives and aims of his life, in fact the whole complex of his experiences, must pass under scrutiny and review. Whatever it be that lies in his heart, if the holy of holies be there, the door is held open and the modern religious thinker feels that he is welcome to enter.

To state the method of approach positively and more in detail: The modern student tries to perceive the whole spiritual world in which Jesus lived during his human career, whether the elements of it came to him through inheritance and the environment of his life or sprang originally from within him. His character is to be apprehended through the atmosphere about him that called forth what was in him and determined its form, and through the inner movements of his soul in those circumstances. It is necessary to live with him and look out upon the world of men and things with his eyes. His words and deeds are a mirror of his heart.

Such questions as the following take on a new meaning: How did Jesus contemplate the material world? How did he bear himself in his contact with other men? How was he affected by what he saw among them—poverty and sickness, cruelty, injustice, or oppression? the ravages of sorrow and death? the efforts of fallen men to reform?

How did he act toward the common and ignorant as well as toward the intelligent and lofty? how toward women and children and the aged? How did he bear his own experiences of trial or disappointment or ill usage or the prospect of a violent death?

Further questions arise: How did Jesus interpret himself and the relation he bore to the world of men? What ambitions had he worldward? When he thought of the hopes that men had held to before his day and held still, how did they determine his conception of his own calling? How did he reconcile himself to the course of the divine providence when he saw it moving directly counter to his desires? What guiding principle lay in his mind when he contemplated the death by crucifixion?

There is still another question the modern man asks in relation to the character of Jesus, namely: What conviction of his relation to God underlay his acts and sayings? Was he conscious of a relation Godward that was peculiar to himself? Did he believe himself possessed of some unique divine gift? How did his convictions stand the test of the sentence and execution of death?

The interest one feels in these questions is not that of the mere scholar or the philosopher. The interest of the modern theologian is practical all the way through. It is the interest of one who wishes to fulfil the moral imperatives that give to human life its seriousness and who wants to know what light Jesus' life throws on his own moral struggles. The modern man feels that there can be no ready-made answer to his questions. To offer such an answer

is to offer a stone for bread. The answer of Jesus to us can come only from the way he fits himself on to our life's experiences. It is only as his moral character is transcribed into our souls that we know him. The ability to interpret him is ultimately his gift.

It is not to be denied that the attempt to analyze the character of Jesus carries with it strenuous moral demands upon him who would make it. From these demands there can be no escape. Nor can there be any limit to them. There can be no finality in the moral interpretation, because there can be no finality in the moral progress of the interpreter. Our understanding of his career (or of any man's, for that matter), and our own moral progress are always parallel to each other. Our estimate of him is always a reflection of our own moral worth. This leads to the third point of view.

III. The Religious Estimate of Jesus

The historian has an interest in Jesus, for the story of human life would be badly written if it left him out. The philosopher has an interest in him, for surely his personality has become a tremendous factor in the decipherment of the meaning of this mysterious universe. But the Christian theologian has an interest that is deeper still. It is the interest of the religious man. It is finally from this point of view that the modern student approaches him. I mean that the modern Christian student carries with him consciously into this interpretative task a conviction of the reality, worth, and eternal permanency of the spiritual; a faith in the presence among men of a God whose righteous-

ness purifies us and whose love compasses us about with loving-kindness and tender mercy; an experience of a great deliverance, of an unspeakable good, of a fellowship that is pure; a hope of a final perfection of this fellowship in time to come.

It might be said, perchance, that the spiritual world and our place in it are what they are no matter what may be said of Jesus, and we may frame our conceptions of these things independently of him. Not so for the Christian. And the reason therefor is simple: The Christian has come into a peculiar relation to the spiritual world, his life has taken on a distinctive character and, according to his best knowledge, this character has come to him through the advent of Jesus Christ into that world in which our personality moves. It is impossible for the Christian to dissociate him from those religious acquisitions which we treasure as the most meaningful thing in our lives. To do so would be like trying to open the inmost door into life's significance for us after throwing the key away. Thus, while we say that the Christian theologian's personal estimate of Jesus will always reflect the character of his own inner life, it will always have a subjective source, at the same time we see that his exposition of his subjective experience necessarily carries with it a reference to Jesus Christ.

Of this there can be no reasonable doubt. So far as we can tell, the influence of Jesus, more than any other, has made us what we are. His words and deeds portrayed in the Gospels have imprinted an image of him on our hearts. Life has become different in consequence. We are inwardly changed. We con-

template him now with the sense of that change in our hearts. The language of poetry is better fitted to tell of it than the formulas of science. He touches us, and we are whole. He speaks, and our hearts leap for joy. He carries us away into the secret and power of his life till we say almost in ecstasy, "We have been crucified with him." Theology can no longer ignore these experiences. Without them it would degenerate into a mere pseudo-science.

We are guarded against giving way to sentimentalism here and against using his name as a mere convenience on which to hang our mysticism by a great historic fact, the career of the Christian communion. Our personal religious experience is not isolated, nor is it merely as one among many contemporaries that we possess it. It is a great spiritual potency flowing down through the generations with increasing momentum from the days of Jesus of Nazareth to the present. It appears as a redemptive moral force making its way into the life of the whole of our humanity. This marvelous spiritual dynamic cannot be explained away or detached from his historic personality. Men have found no higher expression of their hope for the race than these words: "That we may be like him."

With this in mind, the modern theologian makes his estimate of Jesus and seeks for an adequate expression of it. The contrast with the traditional method is evident at a glance. The latter method was to begin with some definition or formal doctrine of his person which was traced by the text-proof method to the Bible, and then, on the basis of it, to seek to arouse in men's

minds the appropriate personal experience. Thus, one might say he is the Son of God, coeternal with the Father, and thence endeavor to feel toward him the sense of reverence and mystery that such a name denotes. This is the method of Catholicism and the Protestant catechisms. It proceeds from outward belief to inward faith, from doctrine to experience, from external authority to inner life. It seeks conformity with a creed.

The modern theologian looks at the matter oppositely. He seeks first of all to bring men to the facts and then to enable them to see Jesus with their own spiritual eyes and feel him with their hearts, without interposing a definition between. He knows that theological formulas are only symbols and not exact determinations of reality. Hence if he reveres (as he truly does) the creeds of the past, it is only because they are monuments to the endeavors men made in earlier times to explain and further the religious life as they knew it. He knows that they are not *termini* of our religious life but only "way-stations" where men "coaled up" in order to pass on. We honor the faith of our fathers the most when we transcend it.

It is easy, therefore, to perceive how a modern theologian feels when he is confronted with the demand that he say "Yes" or "No" to some accepted doctrine of Jesus Christ. He feels that the question implies a perversion of his aim as a thinker. He knows that for the multitudes whose burdens are already too heavy to be borne it tends to prostitute the gospel of an infinite love to the interest of a blinding and enslaving law.

How, then, does the modern Christian theologian think of Jesus? He thinks of him in relation to a practical end, even when constructing a theory. Theology is no science of abstract truth. It is a practical discipline. It is always an attempt to answer the question, "What must I do to be saved?" When the modern theologian concerns himself with Jesus Christ he seeks not to retire from the highways and fields where men toil and strive in order that he may indulge in the cultivation of a mystical but speechless faith, nor does he seek for some ready-made scientific or philosophic formula into which the Lord may be fitted, but he seeks to know what it is that causes men to miss the aim of life and to discover what there is in Jesus Christ to deliver them. He seeks, so to say, to bring Jesus and the present world face to face, to interpret him to the world and to reinterpret the world in his presence, to express the meaning of his career in terms, not of an ancient need, but in terms of the needs of the present, to reveal to men a safe working basis for life and action, which is another way of saying that he seeks to point them to a God in whom they may confide. In his doctrinal constructions, therefore, he seeks to forge new implements for the Christian preacher of good tidings. If in this he utilizes the scientific, philosophical, political, or juristic forms of thought now current, he does so with the aim of showing men that their movements on all the great highways traveled by the human soul will reach the goal when all their activities are permeated with the spirit Jesus introduced into the life of the world.

If, then, the modern theologian confesses, as he must, that in respect to Jesus' relation to them he has no ready-made panacea to give out offhandedly to men, no fixed formulas for thought and will for the want of which men are going astray and missing the secret of life, that is because he has a higher estimate of Jesus than his predecessors.

He is more truly a man of faith. To him the method of approach to Jesus is of greater account than the doctrinal "conclusions" one may reach. For true life is never static but always progressive. His attitude is one of humble inquiry for something more in Jesus than the world has yet seen and of assured trust that the quest cannot be in vain.

GOOD-WILL *VERSUS* NON-RESISTANCE

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How easy it is to praise or damn a movement by labeling it! Professor Buckham helps us to see certain differences which we really ought to see. There is a widespread difference of opinion as to just what course of action in international affairs is thoroughly Christian, but among Christians there should be no question as to the determination to be followers of Jesus Christ. If the church can produce the sacrificial social-mindedness which he possessed, it can very well trust experts in foreign affairs to devise ways in which such an attitude of mind can be expressed. But it is useless to talk about peace before we have a peaceable people.

It is a common blunder—especially misleading just now—as well as a deep injustice to Christianity, to confuse its virile spirit with *non-resistance*. Neither Jesus nor his apostles taught any such weak and spineless doctrine. The words "Resist not evil" should be understood in the light of those that follow. There is all the difference in the world between taking a blow upon one cheek and *turning the other also*. To turn the other cheek is to turn the tables on the smiter and vanquish him by revealing him to himself. Turning the other cheek is both strategy and victory. Submitting to a blow is a negative attitude; turning

the other cheek is positive. It declares, indubitably, a principle and a policy. Such conduct disarms an assailant. It knocks his weapon from his hand by paralyzing it, so to speak. It lets him know that you know just what a fool he is making of himself and are sorry for him. Moreover, it gives him a chance to recover his sanity and self-control, not by preaching at him, but by challenging his better selfhood.

This conduct is the coolest kind of courage as well as the most masterful courtesy. It shows that the citadel and fortress of one's selfhood are impregnable. The man who turns the other